DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 103 892 CS 201 952

AUTHOR Esch, Robert M.
TITLE Writing as a Liberating Activity: The Journal in the Sophomore Survey Course.
PUB DATE Mar 75
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (26th, St. Louis, March 13-15, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Abstracts; *Composition (Literary); Curriculum Guides; *Diaries; *English Literature; Higher Education; Learning Activities; *Teaching Methods; Writing

ABSTRACT

This paper describes an English literature survey course in which journal keeping and abstracts are used as learning tools. Journals are useful because of the high degree of freedom and subjectivity which they allow students in writing: no assignments are given and there are no length requirements. Abstracts of articles and books that students encounter are used to encourage research and reinforce classroom discussions. An appendix includes a course syllabus and sample excerpts from the journals of students enrolled in the course. (TS)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED103892

# WRITING AS A LIBERATING ACTIVITY: THE JOURNAL IN THE SOPHOMORE SURVEY COURSE

The Journal is a collection of personal, expressive writings in which one voices his emotional responses to what he reads and discusses in the course. His increasing awareness of what nineteenth and twentieth-century artists were doing, or were attempting to do in their art, will be reflected in the pages of his Journal. Ideas that come up in class that a student wants to meditate about, material that he reads in the textbook, critical articles that he discovers in the library, thoughts that he has about his enthusiasm or disillusionment with the course and the material he studies--such will be the material for his Journal entries.

Robert M. Esch, Assistant Professor
The University of Texas at El Paso
Conference on College Composition and Communication
March 14, 1975 St. Louis, Missouri

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Robert M. Esch
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

CS 201 952

Robert M. Esch
The University of Texas at El Paso

At U.T. El Paso I have used the journal method in my sophomore level survey course with some success in liberating students in their writing. I have distributed a multicolored stencil to you that explains the purpose and format for the Journal--a stencil quite similar to those that I hand out each semester to the students in the course.

Why have I resorted to this type of gimmickry in the survey course? For a number of reasons, not the least of which is my constant attempt to reach the student, to find new methods that might help him to remember English literature long after he has finished the course. Moreover, in twelve years of teaching the same, or similar material to students, I have become exhausted with the same old methods that my teachers at Wisconsin tried out on me and the type of endless cycle that I am perpetuating in my own work as a teacher. The same poems, the same prose selections, the same anthology (the Norton)--despite their sometimes frustrating changes in new editions--the same types of tests, the same test questions, and finals, and.... Perhaps my point is clear. Just as my students have been screaming for a little bit of change--of liberation--so have I.

And the Journal is, in some respects, an answer to me--and possibly will be for you, if you dare try it in your survey.

I begin by explaining to my class that the type of writing we will be doing is quite similar to the expressive pieces writers produced in the nineteenth century--highly subjective reactions, similar to those in Dorothy Wordsworth's Journals or Coleridge's Notebooks. I bring copies of some of these nineteenth-century works to show students what the writers were doing. The books provide a form they may imitate in their own Journals. Placing the writing activity in its historical setting--relating it to the writings in the nineteenth century--helps clarify my purpose in making this assignment to students. I have not used this method in the first half of the course but may try it at some future date.

I also explain when introducing the Journal to the class the great amount of freedom they will have in creating their work. They will not have to fear my red

pen hovering over every entry, although I will ultimately make comments in their Journals. At no time will I circle misspelled words and react hysterically to comma splices; they're sophomores. If they want to spell incorrectly, if they want to use poor grammar, their grades will suffer, but can I really help them any more if they have gotten this far? My comments will focus on their thinking, the perceptiveness or shallowness of their reactions. Additionally, I make them realize that while they have a great deal of freedom in creating their Journal, they have the onerous burden of responsibility. Since they are not going to be "tested", since they are not required to take notes, to memorize, to get it all together for the traditional three hour final examination marathon, they must accept the responsibility for reading the material assigned and be ready to contribute to class discussions over the material. If students show up unprepared, they know I might embarrass them by calling on them in class when they haven't read the material. The silence in the classroom as we wait for their response, the frowns of the teacher, the sighs of their peers--all of these they will have to endure if they come unprepared. And further, I make it clear that if a student is repeatedly absent and contributes nothing to the class, I will drop him for non-performance of work. The silent student who does not even speak out in his Journal is wasting his time and mine by routine appearances in class. I am not afraid to tell him so.

Students determine the entries for their Journal. I make no assignments for special themes or short essays. Nor do I specify length of the entry. I suppose I have some suppressed expectations that I don't know about myself or can even communicate to the student--expectations about what an entry should be like. I do not say that an entry MUST be one page long or CAN'T BE a series of unconnected thoughts. Each student must decide for himself what is honest effort on his part, what best communicates to me and to him that he is learning by writing in the Journal. He may wish to collect articles that he has xeroxed while studying in the library; he may want to decorate his Journal with his

imitation of Blake's drawings; he may even want to write a parody of Wordsworth or an imitation of Keats. I do ask that students write once each week so that I can see approximately eight entries half way through the semester and seven or eight at the end of the semester.

One other requirement is that five of the entries must be abstracts of articles or sections of books that the student encounters in the Library. I frequently call his attention to scholarly books and articles that I found helpful when I was a student or more recent works that I have encountered. Visionary Company is a big help while Fearful Symmetry is more likely to confuse; Victorian Temper is a great help when we move into the Victorians. I talk about the periodical indices, mention where I have found helpful information in places like the MLA Bibliographies or even specialized helps like the PQ Bibliography. I ask that the abstract include the central thesis of the article, the major points the author uses to develop his thesis, and the student's personal reaction to what the critic had to say. The abstract appears in paragraph form, about a page long. It may not conform to the MLA abstract form, but it does record what the student read about in his own words--and it also includes his evaluation. He finds articles that disagree with critical positions I have taken in class or support thoughts he might have had. The research is a very positive reinforcement to classroom discussions. Many are eager to share what they have read; they learn to be less frightened about speaking up in class or calling my hand on a point that I present vaguely. Reading the articles and writing about them develops a critical attitude toward literature and helps the student become more analytical and more likely to read the assignment more than once.

Teachers in the sophomore survey course have a number of options at their disposal. If we are to support the teaching function of the composition teachers, we must continue to give some type of writing in the survey course, but must it continue to be a theme?.. of the traditional essay examinations? My students

have found this to be a challenge, and for many of them it is a more difficult method than that used in a more traditional approach. The excerpts that I have provided on the last page of the handout are typical, even though I happened to be using the method in the summer term of five weeks. We do not sit around and make mud pies with each other, as I tell them, we read a lot, we discuss a lot, and we write our thoughts down in a Journal--something that students will always have with them, something that reflects their growing awareness about literature when they were sophomores in college, a writing activity that truly is a liberating experience for them--and for me.

The University of Texas at El Paso
English 3212--Spring 1975

Robert M. Esch

English 3212, Survey of English Literature, will focus on three periods in English Literature--Romantic (1798-1832), Victorian (1832-1901), and Modern (1901- ). We shall discover that much romantic poetry and prose is an index to the temperaments of the artists who created them. Early nineteenth-century poets question the notion that poetry is the art of imitation and that the chief goal of the poet is to hold up a mirror to nature and copy it precisely in his art. We shall discover that romantic poets were concerned with the role of the imagination in the creation of art and the subjective responses of the poet to the world of nature which he translates in his art. Less objective, less rational, less bound by rules than eighteenth-century art, nineteenth-century poetry and prose finds new concerns, new directions. Throughout English 3212 we shall investigate these new directions for art in the nineteenth century and the reaction against them in the literature of the modern age.

In order to understand these three periods of English literature better, in English 3212 we shall spend the semester keeping a Journal. We will have no weekly tests, no term paper or themes, no final examination. Your grade will be based on a number of criteria: class participation and your Journal. Your Journal will be handed in for comments on March 7 and May 8. I will make a written comment on your Journal March 7, giving you direction about how well you are doing or how you might improve your Journal. Your progress will be indicated by a grade, but that grade will be less important than the grade assigned to your Journal on May 8, which will be your final grade in the course.

The Journal is a form of expressive discourse that was very popular in the nineteenth century when writers kept diaries, wrote extensive correspondence, and frequently wrote their autobiographies. For this reason I feel it is the most appropriate writing method for you in this course. The Journal is a collection of personal, subjective, expressive writings in which you voice your emotional responses

to what we read and discuss in the course. It is not a diary of events that happen to you, nor is it a booklet of assignments or themes. Your increasing awareness of what nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists were doing, or were attempting to do in their art, will be reflected in the pages of your Journal. Ideas that come up in class that you want to meditate about, material that you read in the text book, materials that you collect which you wish to copy into the Journal or cut out and attach to the pages of your Journal, critical articles that you discover in the library, thoughts that you have about your enthusiasm or disillusionment with this course and the material we study--such will be the material for your Journal entries.

There are a number of things that I must see in your Journal, however. I will set a few minimum requirements:

1. You should write in your Journal once each week. I expect to see a minimum of fifteen entries. You may write more, of course, but you should include no fewer than fifteen entries. Periodically throughout the semester you might stop by my office to consult about your progress in the Journal.

2. Five of the entries should be abstracts of articles or sections of books that you read in the library about the material we are studying. Include in the abstract the central thesis of the article, the major points that the author uses to develop his thesis,and your personal reaction to what he had to say, however rational, however insane..

Journal Form

You may use any size book for your Journal. It may be any color, and you may write in either pen or pencil, in any color you like. If you are more comfortable typing, do so. My primary concern will be with the content of the Journal rather than its form. Do not turn in loose papers since they might be lost in the shuffle of papers. Remember that this Journal will be your written record of thoughts you had this semester; you will probably return to it, with amusement, later in life.

Your entries may vary in length and form. You may begin to react to a poem in the first week's entry, revise your reaction in later entries, and possibly even create a finished theme right in your Journal. Some of your entries may not have formal structure--they may be loosely connected thoughts that you might wish to keep for future reference. You might even be moved to parody an author or imitate him in an original poem. I shall judge your Journal for its freshness and originality. I shall look for perceptive reactions, stimulating insights about literature, and a growing awareness about nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature.

Class Performance

This course will be different from any other course you have taken because we are not engaging in the traditional machinery of the ordinary class--tests, themes, finals, oral reports. You will have to be self-reliant and force yourself to read material that you will not be tested over. If I notice that you come to class unprepared time and time again, that you cut class repeatedly, I will drop you for non-performance of class work. If you miss five classes, you will automatically be dropped from the course. If this type of class format does not appeal to you, the English Department has other sections of English 3212 available for your convenience.

Excerpts from Journals

Summer 1974
The University of Texas at El Paso
Robert M. Esch

"Yes, Mr. Esch, I agree with you that the Journal form is far easier than theme form. It is a relief not to worry about every little comma or misspelled word. And I think it opens our minds to a greater level of creativity. It's also nice to be able to say "I hate Shelley" without causing heart failure to the dear English prof.

It looks like I'll remember one class out of this whole UTEP summer school 12 weeks. The un-mudpies English 3212. No tests, no themes, no papers, no final. All that's asked is that I pay attention and participate in class and write reactions. For once, a prof has asked that we use our minds and be honest in our outlook toward class and English in general. What a switch from "yes sir, no sir, I agree with you entirely sir". What a challenge.

Some of the bad points about this course are rather obvious. A lot of time is needed for this course. If you use the Journal in the fall semester, I believe 3 entries per week would be too much for a student with 15 hours. Two entries per week would probably be better. Also, we will be turning in our journals without any idea of what our grades are. A final point is that since we didn't have any tests, why bother to take notes in class. We won't have to memorize anything, so, to me, a lot of things in class seemed useless to me. Why lecture, take notes, or read the novel if there is not going to be a test? is what I often wondered.

I believe this type of course is better than the usual type because the students don't have to worry about the tedious memorization of the works of the poets. We have the freedom to express our views in the Journal, and say what we feel, without being interrupted or immediately criticized. I have enjoyed this course for the most part. I usually don't like English, and I despise having to read.

All in all, I think I have come out ahead (in English 3212). I have even enjoyed the journal. It was something different for me. Perhaps my being so verbose explains my liking it. But I have learned from it (and its criticism). And since that's what I'm supposed to be doing here, I think it has been a most beneficial summer.

I have to agree with Mr. Esch on one idea. I, too, wonder why so many "little old ladies" are such followers of Browning. But I'm sure not all of his poetry is about lovers' revenge. And maybe they just like the beautiful sounds of his poetry, which I, too, find appealing.

I have learned many things in English this session. But one thing especially stands out. In all of my previous English classes I've read poems for enjoyment and then we interpreted them some in class. I hated the interpretation part and always asked "Why can't we just read a poem as it is for enjoyment?" But I've begun to realize that part of the fun of reading poetry, and an essential part, is the interpreting of it. But in order to interpret you must know something of the background of the poet and his ideas. Now, I must interpret a poem after reading it, in order to get the full enjoyment out of it. That seems to be quite a drastic change for me--one who hated English teachers always interfering with the poets because they always interpreted the poems."